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The University of Dayton

News Release

Nov. 16, 1993

Contact: Candace Stuart

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON PROFESSOR FINDS TIES BETWEEN RAP ARTIST ICE-T AND SCHOLAR DU BOIS

DAYTON, Ohio -- Despite the bad rap they get for sometimes violent lyrics, rap artists see and accurately describe their world with an insight akin to a double-consciousness the scholar W.E.B. Du Bois experienced and articulated in the early 1900s, says Eric Watts, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Dayton.

Like Du Bois, rap artists recognize that they live in a society with clashing values, contradictions and abuses. The violence they describe is in part a reflection of the violent nation they live in, Watts argues. Rap provides both the content and forum for debate on these issues and a chance for artists to define themselves within their community.

He will present his findings on "Subversion and Selling Self: Double-Consciousness in Gangsta Rap" on Nov. 20 during the Speech Communication Association's annual meeting in Miami.

"Rap music provides artists with the ability to express political ideas, to express an ideology, to confront people about their prejudices and to confront themselves about their own prejudices as well as the rap music itself being the forum for the debate," he says. "They're trying to expose conditions that we need to come to grips with."

Watts traces the concept of double-consciousness to Du Bois, who wrote about former slaves stripped of their African heritage by a Eurocentric society that then imposed its own value system on them -- a value system that belittled them. Blacks who accepted the dominant culture denied their own selfhood. Those who, despite social forces, managed to hold onto their African identity had to straddle two worlds, creating a double-consciousness that let them scrutinize each.

"You can see beyond what other people can see; it's empowering because you can make changes," Watts says. "But it can also be a curse because you can see things that you

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don't necessarily want to see," particularly the pain and self-debasing of African-Americans who uncritically embrace the Eurocentric view.

Competing world views, painful visions and potential empowerment are apparent in rap as well, says Watts. "What I see in black music and black artistic expression as a whole, is when the issue of self-identity becomes stated, argued or performed, you have a tendency for different value systems that have been historically rooted in different communities clashing in the form itself."

In his presentation, Watts will focus on the Hustler in Ice-T's "New Jack Hustler" to highlight the character's dual and sometimes dueling vision. A product of his capitalist environment, the Hustler shifts from seeing women as objects and himself as a commodity to a re-evaluation of himself within a community, recognition of the oppression of materialism and the potential to resist self-destructive forces.

Although not the contemplative thinker that Du Bois was, Ice-T is nonetheless self-reflective and sophisticated. "It's the kind of sophistication that is more of an urban ethos," Watts says. "It's the kind of sophistication that many academics have a hard time legitimizing."

Criticism of the violent imagery of Ice-T is sometimes misplaced, Watts says. Ice-T and his violence reflect America and its violence. "Rap artists say, 'If you want to critique me, fine, critique me. But don't stop with me because that is a superficial critique.' They want to use their own art as a vehicle for critiquing society."

Many of the rap artists he studies view rap music as a redemptive force, a kind of saving grace for America, Watts says. "Rap music says art must do something, art must have a social function."

Not an elitist art form, rap gets its strength from community, he says. "The artist doesn't sit in an ivory tower and reflect on life. The artist hangs in the streets."

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